

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Finding a Needle in the Haystack

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It's doubtful that finding and interviewing candidates is at the top of your list of fun job activities. It is, however, a necessity that can make or break an organization. Identifying talent is tough, especially considering that industry estimates tell us for every eight grower jobs that need to be filled, there's most likely one candidate.

What's the best way to navigate these challenging odds? We talked to some folks who've had success, as well as an HR expert, to determine ways to increase your success rate, including specific attributes to look for when identifying talent, because chances are you're not going to find someone with the exact skill set you need. But that's okay—hiring based on behavior traits might be a better approach than focusing solely on specific experience.

Attitude is everything

Jason Wennington, Head Grower and Production Manager at Ebert's Greenhouse Village in Ixonia, Wisconsin, uses an approach he called "The Willings"—is the candidate willing to learn, willing to listen and willing to work hard? These three questions run through his head when identifying people within the organization he feels would fit into a greenhouse role.

"You can't expect people to come to you asking for opportunities," he said. Instead he observes how team members behave and pinpoints attributes that indicate aptitudes that will lead to success as growers.

Jason tells stories of employees who started in their late teens and 20s in retail, but are willing to work hard, finish projects quickly and jump to the next task without coming back over and over to ask questions. These same behaviors are required to work in a greenhouse during the busy season when efficiency is critical and time for hand-holding just isn't there. He starts new growers in the easiest ranges and watches how each candidate handles the stress.

"Are they frazzled and burned out?" he asked. "Or are they really loving it?"

Behavior is the key—even above horticultural knowledge. Todd Downing, Managing Partner at Best Human Capital & Advisory Group in Indianapolis, a human resources advisory firm that specializes in recruiting, is focused on the horticulture industry, but doesn't often place candidates with growing backgrounds, although such candidates would certainly be in high demand if available.

"If you are looking for specific grower experience, you'll be behind the eight ball," he said. "We have to start looking to hire off-behaviors. Is the candidate hungry, humble and smart?"

Todd boiled it down to one word: energy. Is there a spark, he asked? Once that person is identified, a company needs to have a training and development program in place to bring them in and test their mindset.

Emily Showalter, Human Resources Manager at Willoway Nurseries in Avon, Ohio, hires 15 to 20 full-time team members each year and feels the nursery has a solid system in place for efficient and effective hiring.

Willoway uses Indeed.com and LinkedIn effectively to identify candidates and bring them in. Indeed.com helps cast the net and vet potential talent, and LinkedIn allows her to put the company name out there, proactively, to help candidates learn about company culture when they're on the hunt for a job.

"We have standard operating procedures in place to make sure steps don't get missed," she said. They use a Predictive Index system for behavior-based interviews and focus on core values to determine if the prospective hire will be a good fit.

"Transparency is important and we share results with the candidate." If hired, these analytics also may identify tools the team member will need to increase success, she said.

Casting the net

Whether you use candidate acquisition services like Indeed.com or recruiters like Todd might depend on the size of your operation. There are many pros and cons to consider. If you recruit locally, perhaps your best bet isn't to post to a huge job board, but instead to leverage community contacts and local word of mouth. Sharing what you do for the community and promoting company values can go a long way when folks in the area looking for employment start making a list of companies they want to approach.

"Understand the importance of creativity and networking in your community," Todd said. "And be proactive."

Jason echoed this strategy and explained that Ebert's starts broadly, using local newspapers and Facebook to advertise job opportunities, but rarely recruits specifically for the greenhouse. Instead, they seek out potential team members more generally and then uses the interview and initial positions to identify the talents needed for growing.

"We empower people within first," he said.

What to look for

Determining positive behaviors and traits can be challenging, all agree. But there are commonalities that can help reduce misses and increase success rates when hiring.

Some signs of a great candidate include the three "willings" mentioned above, as well as reliability and energy. Todd shared one good tactic to dig into the energy a candidate shows in an interview and a way to help avoid fake energy. This requires conversation in the interview setting.

"Ask them to explain the steps they took to solve a problem in the past," he explained. "They should convey excitement in the facts and details, not just theory." And if you're looking to hire a grower, ask them what else they've done in their life that was technical or required a technical mindset. They might have never grown a plant, he said.

Jason asks potential hires about growing, but then always digs deeper. He likes it when candidates ask questions and try to learn why things are done a certain way.

"Watch for excitement," he said. "A potential young grower asked me if she could get a spray license—it was like a beam from heaven!" He feels a part of his job, and everyone's job in horticulture, is to keep young team members excited. "We are stewards of the industry."

Emily feels one of the easiest things a candidate or new hire can do to be successful is to show up every day, on time.

"We want 100% effort and an open mind," she said. "But we also want good ideas back. Participate, ask questions

and speak up when there are problems.”

Once a new employee begins, Willoway has an onboarding process in place for new hires that includes training on company culture and departmental specifics. “We try to set the person up for success,” she added.

Get serious about HR

If you want to bring top-notch team members on board and avoid wasting time and money on poor hires, it’s time to take hiring seriously.

“The horticulture industry has, unfortunately, tended to treat human resources transactionally and not strategically,” Todd said. “Budget for HR like you budget for automation.”

He suggested greenhouses hire an HR professional and give them a seat at the leadership table. HR is more important today than ever, he believes.

Flying by the seat of your pants is rarely a good strategy, especially when building a competent and successful team. HR rules and laws aside (that’s a whole different topic for a different article), you can’t afford to waste time and money when identifying talent and bringing people on board. Not these days. You also can’t afford to risk significant crop losses and damage to company culture and morale.

Consider spending time this off-season putting procedures in place and re-evaluating your hiring processes before you conduct another interview. Study up on companies with successful hiring track records and talk to your existing team, and industry peers about ways to approach hiring in a new, more effective way. It will certainly be time well spent. **GT**